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Deposited in DRO:

27 February 2017

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

McMichael, Celia and Nunn, Caitlin and Correa-Velez, Ignacio and Gifford, Sandra M. (2017) 'Resettlement of refugee youth in Australia : experiences and outcomes over time.', *Forced migration review.*, 54 . pp. 66-68.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.fmreview.org/resettlement/mcmichael-nunn-correavelez-gifford.html>

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Resettlement of refugee youth in Australia: experiences and outcomes over time

Celia McMichael, Caitlin Nunn, Ignacio Correa-Velez and Sandra M Gifford

Findings from a longitudinal study of long-term resettlement experiences of refugee youth living in Melbourne show that refugee experiences – both pre- and post-resettlement – continue to influence opportunities and outcomes many years after arrival.

Refugee-related services, policies and research in countries of resettlement typically focus on the early years of resettlement. Refugee experiences of resettlement, however, change over time, as does the resettlement context, with ongoing adjustments to policy, service provision, host society reception, and homeland and ethnic community politics.

There is inadequate understanding of the experiences of resettled refugees over time, in particular of the long-term settlement trajectories and experiences of resettled refugee youth. Refugees who resettle as young people have been found to face significant challenges, such as: disrupted education pre-migration and associated barriers to educational success post migration; extensive family responsibilities including caring for siblings and assisting parents; and experiences of discrimination in the host society. However, refugee young people demonstrate significant resilience and a great capacity to negotiate these challenges.

'Good Starts' was a mixed-method longitudinal study of refugee settlement and well-being that aimed to better understand how to support settlement for young people with refugee backgrounds.¹ In 2004, 120 young people from refugee backgrounds aged between eleven and nineteen years (55 female, 65 male) were recruited into the study; all had recently been resettled via Australia's Humanitarian Program. The young people came from 12 different countries within Africa, the Middle East and Europe, and their average length of residence in Australia at that point was six months. Qualitative and quantitative data on their psychosocial health and settlement experiences were collected annually for four years. In 2012-13, the participants were contacted again;

51 of the original 120 (25 female, 26 male) participated in an in-depth interview and completed a short questionnaire. These participants were by then aged between 18 and 27 years and had been living in Australia for eight to nine years.

Settlement outcomes

One young woman from Sudan recalled that "it took a bit of time for me to actually start to belong... I just started fitting in, then getting used to the language, and studying, and so on." In their first year, most young people (90%) indicated that they felt the Australian community cared about them, while 18% reported experiences of discrimination.

Eight to nine years after arrival, participants largely imagined and planned their futures as being in Australia. 96% now felt the Australian community cared about them, yet discrimination was still a problem for many. 27% indicated that they had experienced discrimination in the previous six months, including by the wider public, work colleagues and police. A young man from Sudan said, "some people ... they're happy to have diversity, they're happy to have different food and different clothes. And some people just hate, you know, as if we're stealing their future."

Participants reported that Australian citizenship provided a sense of security and a foundation for building a future in Australia. It offered insurance against further forced displacement, and it also allowed them to maintain transnational identities and attachments by facilitating overseas travel and return to Australia. As one young man from Ethiopia said, "I feel more comfortable now. If anything happens, I won't be going anywhere. I'm Aussie... I have that confidence."

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More years of schooling prior to arrival, greater levels of self-esteem, not having moved house in the previous year and greater social support were factors associated with higher self-reported health status scores over time. A stronger ethnic identity was positively associated with happiness. Participants who had experienced discrimination scored themselves significantly lower in both health status and levels of happiness. Importantly, eight to nine years after arrival, social inclusion or exclusion continued to have a significant impact on health and happiness, with higher average levels of health and happiness among those who reported experiences of social inclusion (and vice versa).

Attending school and achieving an education is one of the most desired opportunities among resettled refugee young people. One young woman from Sudan stated, "I want to finish school and get a good job and make my family." There are, however, substantial barriers to completing secondary school for refugee youth. Eight to nine years after arrival, 62% of participants had completed secondary school. However, those who were older on arrival, had experienced discrimination in Australia or had experienced teen pregnancy and early parenthood were significantly less likely to complete secondary school. Importantly, young people who indicated that they had not experienced discrimination in Australia were almost five times more likely to complete secondary school than those who said they had.

There is no typical employment trajectory for young people with refugee backgrounds. In this cohort, according to the follow-up interviews in 2012-13, 45% of participants were employed, mostly in casual or part-time roles including in childcare, security, care of the elderly and retail. A similar number were simultaneously or alternatively completing further education, including both university degrees and vocational training. Others were caring for children or parents, or job-seeking. One young man from Ethiopia explained, "I don't want to be like the lowest people around me. Like for example, people

who are jobless...I don't want to be like that. I want to have a good quality of life."

In particular, due to pressing financial responsibilities to family in Australia and overseas, several young people reported taking on unskilled work – rather than pursuing further study – in order to generate immediate income. Eight to nine years after arrival, 90% of young women and 54% of young men said some or most of their income was sent to support family overseas.

Factors that helped young people to attain desirable employment included: emotional and practical support from family members; personal contacts such as teachers, both refugee and non-refugee peers, service providers and members of ethnic communities who acted as sources of information about employment pathways and opportunities; English literacy; and formal bridging programmes that helped them gain acceptance into university courses.

By 2012-13, one third of participants had made a return visit to their country or region of origin. Of those who had not yet gone back, 61% hoped to do so in the future, while the rest did not intend to visit. Reasons for return visits included tourism, to see family, to attend weddings, to connect with their homeland, and for marriage. One young man who was born in Sudan went to Eritrea, his ancestral homeland; he recalled, "to actually be in the country where I'm actually from, where my people are – it was a feeling that I'd never felt before, and it was good." Return visits provided a valued opportunity to renew and maintain connections to homelands. However, no participant expressed an intention to go back permanently, and return visits did not erode their sense of belonging in Australia.

Conclusions

Eight to nine years after arriving in Australia, most resettled young people in the Good Starts study demonstrated a positive and aspirational orientation to life in Australia, including a perception of being cared for, positive evaluations of their health, happiness and quality of life, and a commitment to becoming Australian citizens and pursuing a future in their settlement country. The

factors mediating these outcomes – as well as more practical outcomes such as educational and occupational attainment – relate to both pre- and post-resettlement experiences. Pre-resettlement factors supporting positive settlement outcomes include younger age on arrival and more years of pre-migration education; post settlement, strong networks and social support have a powerful impact, and strong ethnic identity is also valuable. Experiences of discrimination have the most significant adverse impact upon self-reported health and well-being and the pursuit of education.

It is therefore critical to address discrimination, increase the pathways through which refugee youth can access social goods and opportunities such as education and employment, and promote connections to people and place. This will increase the effectiveness of refugee resettlement programmes over the longer term, supporting young people with refugee backgrounds to achieve their aspirations and pursue positive futures.

Celia McMichael
celia.mcmichael@unimelb.edu.au

Lecturer, School of Geography, University of Melbourne <http://geography.unimelb.edu.au/>

Caitlin Nunn caitlin.nunn@durham.ac.uk
 International Junior Research Fellow, School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University; Adjunct Research Fellow, Centre for Cultural Diversity and Wellbeing, Victoria University, Australia www.dur.ac.uk/sass/

Ignacio Correa-Velez
ignacio.correavelez@qut.edu.au
 Associate Professor, School of Public Health and Social Work, Queensland University of Technology www.qut.edu.au/health/about/schools/school-of-public-health-and-social-work

Sandra Gifford sgifford@swin.edu.au
 Professor of Anthropology and Refugee Studies, The Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology www.swinburne.edu.au/research/institute-social-research/

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